

DRUG-TAKING BY PATIENTS WITH VENEREAL DISEASE*

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At the Symposium on Adolescent Drug Dependence organized by the Society for the Study of Addiction, held in London in September, 1966, it was frequently reiterated that little was known about the incidence of the drug-taking habit in the general population.

Bewley (1966) quoted the following figures for drug-taking in the United Kingdom:

Heroin	4- 5	per 100,000 population
Cannabis	30- 60	per 100,000 population
Amphetamines	100-200	per 100,000 population

Most studies have been undertaken by psychiatrists and their social workers. There are, of course, many persons taking drugs who do not present for psychiatric help.

The link between the venereal diseases and drug-taking has been recognized, and further to investigate this matter a survey was carried out of the drug-taking habits of patients with gonorrhoea or syphilis attending the Venereal Diseases Department of St. Mary's Hospital, London during the period April to October, 1966.

Method

An initially random selection was made of all patients with gonorrhoea or syphilis attending St. Mary's Hospital, London, for the first time. Those who were aware of their diagnosis and could converse in English were then interviewed about their smoking, alcohol drinking, and drug-taking habits. Some 200 patients were approached and of these three refused to be interviewed. Married women attending solely as a result of infection from their husbands were excluded.

Urine was collected at the time of interview from 29 patients and analysed for amphetamines.

Results

Data were obtained from 186 patients (130 men and 56 women). The largest group was that of 110 British-born (67 men and 43 women). The next

largest racial group was that of 34 West Indians (30 men and 4 women). There were 42 patients of other nationalities (33 men and 9 women).

The age distribution and average ages are illustrated in the Figure (opposite) and in Table I.

TABLE I
AVERAGE AGE (YRS) OF DRUG-TAKERS AND
NON-DRUG-TAKERS, BY SEX

Have taken Drugs	Men	Women
Yes	25.6	22.5
No	27.3	21.2

Of the 186 patients, 93 admitted taking drugs on occasions, 76 more than once. The incidence of drug-taking among the 110 British-born patients was men 55 per cent. and women 70 per cent. Seventeen of the 34 West Indians (50 per cent.) had taken drugs, but in the group of those of other nationalities the incidence was only nine of 42 (23 per cent.). These figures of incidence and the types of drug used are presented in Tables II to V (opposite and overleaf).

Cannabis was the most popular drug, being used by 37 per cent. of the 93 patients, and next most popular were the amphetamines, used by 34 per cent.; many patients had tried both. The British preference was for amphetamines (50 per cent.) and cannabis (43 per cent.), whereas 44 per cent. of West Indians used cannabis but only 18 per cent. the amphetamines.

The highest incidence of "soft drug" taking was among the British women. Heroin or cocaine or both had been used by only seven patients, five of them British. Ten patients, nine of them British, had taken LSD or other hallucinogens, but only two admitted episodes of continuous use. Three British women said they had occasionally used amyl nitrite. Analysis of the urine for amphetamines gave a positive result on one occasion in the case of one user.

*Received for publication June 26, 1968.
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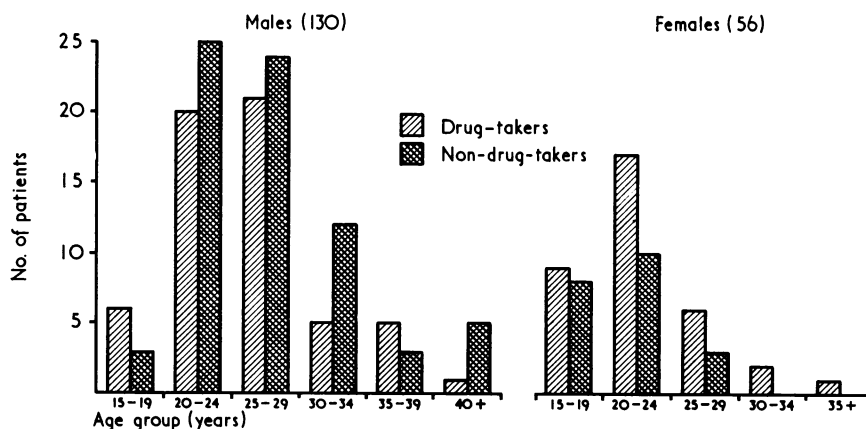


FIGURE Age distribution of drug-takers and non-drug-takers in males and females.

TABLE II
DRUG HABITS OF ALL PATIENTS, BY SEX

Drug-taking		All Patients		Males		Females	
		No.	Per cent.	No.	Per cent.	No.	Per cent.
Use of Drugs	Have taken no drugs	93	50	72	55	21	37
	Have taken some drugs	93	50	58	45	35	63
	Total Patients	186	100	130	100	56	100
Drugs Used	Amphetamines	64	34	32	24	32	57
	Cannabis	71	38	42	32	29	52
	Heroin \pm Cocaine	6	3.2	3	2.3	3	5.4
	LSD, etc.	10	5.4	7	5.4	3	5.4
	Amyl nitrite	3	1.6	0	0	3	5.4
	Cocaine without Heroin	1	0.54	1	0.77	0	0
	Sleeping tablets	22	12	7	5.4	15	27

TABLE III
DRUG HABITS OF BRITISH-BORN PATIENTS, BY SEX

Drug-taking		All Patients		Males		Females	
		No.	Per cent.	No.	Per cent.	No.	Per cent.
Use of Drugs	Have taken no drugs	43	39	30	45	13	30
	Have taken some drugs	67	61	37	55	30	70
	Total	110	100	67	100	43	100
Drugs Used	Amphetamines	55	50	28	42	27	63
	Cannabis	47	43	22	33	25	58
	Heroin	5	4.5	3	4.5	2	4.7
	LSD	9	8.2	6	9.0	3	7.0
	Amyl nitrite	3	2.7	0	0	3	7.0
	Sleeping tablets	19	17	6	9.0	13	30

TABLE IV
DRUG HABITS OF WEST INDIAN PATIENTS

Drug-taking		No.	Per cent.
Use of Drugs	Have taken no drugs	17	50
	Have taken some drugs	17	50
	Total	34*	100
Drugs Used	Amphetamines	6	18
	Cannabis	16	47
	Heroin, LSD, etc.	0	0
	Sleeping tablets	3	8.8

*30 male; 4 female.

TABLE V
DRUG HABITS OF PATIENTS OTHER THAN BRITISH
AND WEST INDIAN

Drug-taking		No.	Per cent.
Use of Drugs	Have taken no drugs	33	79
	Have taken some drugs	9	21
	Total	42*	100
Drugs Used	Amphetamines	3	7.1
	Cannabis	8	19
	Heroin	1	2.4
	LSD	1	2.4
	Cocaine without Heroin	1	2.4
	Sleeping tablets	1	2.4

*33 male; 9 female.

Discussion

A survey such as this must rely on the honesty of the patients and it is possible that some denied taking drugs for fear of possible consequences; it was felt that this was more likely to be the case with West Indians and other non-British groups. The high percentage of patients of all groups who admitted taking drugs is surprising. All social strata were represented. There were only two prostitutes (both British-born, both of whom had taken drugs).

One was surprised how easily drugs could be acquired. Several patients said that "every other person" in the local streets could supply soft drugs on request, and furthermore many knew of an easily accessible source of heroin. All those who had taken heroin had also taken amphetamines and cannabis.

Most of those who denied actually taking drugs admitted that they had been offered them.

The higher percentage of women than men who had taken drugs was notable, and it was clear that the more promiscuous the woman the more likely she was to have taken drugs.

It is emphasized that this survey indicates the incidence of drug-taking in a highly selected group; it is further emphasized that it deals with drug-taking—not with addiction. It is none the less disturbing that, if this sample is truly representative, then in 1966 about 1,500 of the 3,063 patients with gonorrhoea or syphilis at St. Mary's Hospital had used drugs and this figure takes no account of those taking drugs who attended the Department with other forms of sexually acquired disease.

Summary

A survey was made of the drug-taking habits of patients with gonorrhoea or syphilis attending the Venereal Diseases Clinic at St. Mary's Hospital, London, in 1966.

Of 186 persons interviewed, 45 per cent. of the men and 63 per cent. of the women had taken drugs at some time. It is emphasized that this survey indicates the incidence of drug-taking in a selected group—it does not assess addiction.

I should like to thank Drs. F. J. G. Jefferiss and R. R. Willcox for permission to interview patients under their care and for their help and encouragement, and Dr. V. Marks, West Park Hospital, Surrey, for carrying out the urinalysis.

REFERENCE

- BEWLEY, T. H. (1966). *Bulletin of Narcotics*, 18, No. 4, "Proceedings of the Symposium on Adolescent Drug Dependence". (In Press.)

Prises de drogues chez les malades vénériens

RÉSUMÉ

Une enquête effectuée chez 186 gonococciques ou syphilitiques fréquentant la Clinique des Maladies Vénériennes du St Mary's Hospital, Londres, en 1966, montra que 45 pour cent des hommes et 63 pour cent des femmes avaient quelquefois pris des drogues. On fait remarquer que cette enquête montre l'incidence de la prise de drogues dans un groupe sélectionné mais qu'elle n'établit pas qu'il y avait addiction.